

The Gábor in Transylvania, Romania

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The Gábor belong to the wide spectrum of Romani-speaking ethnic groups in Transylvania. Beyond their home region around the city of Tîrgu Mureş (Hungarian: Marosvásárhely) they have been economically embedded and recognised as craftsmen and tradesmen for many generations. Over time they have developed their own specific Romani culture. While this entails the passing down of traditional characteristics from one generation to the next, external factors – such as the current influence of neo-protestant missions – bring visible changes to this culture.



III. 1 *Gábor* with hat



III. 2 *Gábor* at the market

INTRODUCTION

“But, we *Gábor*. Do you know what do we do? We travel. We travel throughout the year, from spring until Christmas. We travel to Hungary, Germany, England and within Romania. And everywhere we look for decent work, do business or build and repair gutters. But we do work properly. We don’t beg and don’t steal. We are big business. Even the police know who we are, the entire Hungarian

government knows that we *Gábor* men with our moustaches and our women in long skirts, we don’t take anything from others and they also know that we believe in God. They know that we are businesspeople. We don’t steal, we don’t hit each other and we do not kill. We don’t do these things. Among all *Gábor* in Transylvania you won’t find a single person who is not a businessman.” (Teréz Burca, *Gábor romni* from Tîrgu Mureş, Romania, in summer 2000)

“We *Gábor*” means a network of hundreds of Romani families who all refer to a certain common ancestor called *Gábor* (English: Gabriel). Although the network of *Gábor* families stretches across many large European cities and even as far as San Francisco on the edge of the Pacific, most *Gábor* consider their home in Transylvania, in the region around Tîrgu Mureş. The *Gábor* are hard workers and traders. Currently one will meet them at almost every weekly market in

Transylvania where they prefer to sell used clothes, jackets and leather shoes or antiques. In line with their traditions, the men wear wide-brimmed hats in addition

to their moustaches. The women dress in their long, mostly floral pleated skirts. They claim to arrange marriages only between themselves. It is the traditional duty

of any married *Gábor* woman to wear a headscarf. In this sense, they have long been part of the public image of ethnically heterogeneous Transylvania.



III. 3 Tîrgu Mureş and other major cities in Romania



III. 4 *Gábor* kids playing cards

HISTORICAL ROOTS

The region of Tîrgu Mureş in Transylvania is today regarded as the central settlement area of the *Gábor*. Names and occupations of the ancestors of today's *Gábor* were found in an old Greek-Catholic parish register from a village nearby. At that time they had the same family names as they do today which are closely linked to their occupations. Thus, the *Rostás* family name is synonymous with *Csurar*, which is translated as sievemaker. The children to be baptised whose family names were *Gábor* and *Buresa* on the other hand usually had their fathers' occupations indicated as *Căldărar* and *Faur*, translated as boilermaker and blacksmith.

All three family names still make up over 90% of all *Gábor* family names. The *Gábor* say that their ancestors came to the region with tents during the 19th century and then settled. They believe their ancestors to have been tent gypsies who had previously travelled across the country in caravans, offering their services and goods to the local population for centuries. Old, preserved tax registers prove that these tent gypsies used to even pay an annual tax to the Hungarians, Austrians and Turks who ruled Transylvania in turn. Sievemakers, copper boiler makers and iron forgers travelled in these caravans, as well as locksmiths, knife grinders, goldsmiths or shoemakers. All these professions were useful to the farmers and herdsmen of rural Transylvania for cen-

turies and were only carried out by these mobile tent gypsies. Yet the settlement of the *Gábor* forefathers in the 19th century in the region of Tîrgu Mureş did not mean that they no longer left their homes. They had solid winter quarters and were on the road only during the summer, as they are to this day. The time of their settlement also saw the era of modernisation approach and the gradual change in their social environment advanced. This had an impact particularly on their range of goods and services, as some handmade products were replaced by industrial production. Additionally, the local markets became richer and more accessible for the settled population and modern media completely changed the previously more mobile entertainment sector.

NEW PROFESSIONS

The principle of independent niche economy characteristic of so-called tent gypsies and the *Gábor* prevailed, even after the change of the product and service range in the 20th century and was also preserved during the Ceauşescu era. The only dif-

ference was that the *Gábor* now increasingly moved by car instead of horse and tent throughout Romania, and specialised in procurement, brandy distillery and gutter construction. Many *Gábor* used the opportunities for international travel with the borders opening after the fall of the Ceauşescu regime in 1989 to do new and sometimes very lucrative business. The

profits from trading in foreign goods led to a strengthened economy for many families. The earlier separation between sievemakers and smiths based on the family names *Rostás* and *Buresa* and *Gábor* no longer exists today. Trade and gutter construction are currently the most important occupations which are carried out across family names.

Hence the *Gábor* can today be found at every market in the region where they sell inexpensive second-hand clothes or shoes that they obtain in large quantities from western Europe, as well as a few antiques. Many families even have regular weekly cycles of market visits to the region, which proves the high demand for the goods offered by the *Gábor*. Some

Gábor families even travel to far away markets in other regions of Romania if the promised gains outweigh the effort of getting there. Some families also specialise in the lucrative role of intermediary for certain products, provided this role is not yet occupied or the necessary capital and appropriate contacts for international business travel are still lacking.

In addition to modern business trips at home and abroad, the migrant craft and labour of gutter construction is done regionally, domestically or internationally. When and where jobs are available, profitable trade is executed. The market businesses are then taken over by other family members.



III. 5 *Gábor* at the market

Fogl. Occup. Group	a.)	b.)	c.)	d.)	e.)	f.)	g.)	h.)	i.)	j.)	k.)	l.)
1.	19	22	13	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2.	9	26	11	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
3.	12	6	4	4	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
4.	3	4	2	14	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5.	3	12	1	14	5	-	1	-	-	2	-	-
6.	13	7	-	8	-	-	-	5	-	1	-	1
7.	6	7	3	10	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-
8.	24	3	4	1	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-
9.	20	1	5	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
10.	8	1	5	7	-	-	-	3	-	2	-	1
11.	13	15	5	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
12.	13	11	1	2	1	6	-	-	1	-	-	-
13.	12	4	-	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
14.	5	8	-	10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
15.	13	1	1	13	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
16.	4	3	-	8	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-
17.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	-	-	-	-
18.	4	18	5	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
19.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	-	-	-	-
ř6 num.	181	149	60	117	8	7	21	7	7	3	2	7

DISTRIBUTION OF TRANSYLVANIAN TAX-PAYING GYPSIES BY OCCUPATION

a.) coppersmith g.) goldsmith
b.) sieve-maker h.) ring-maker
c.) locksmith i.) pin-maker
d.) knife-maker j.) stove-maker
e.) blacksmith k.) shoe-maker
f.) spoon-maker l.) exchanger

III. 6 Tax register, Zsupos 1996

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN GÁBOR CULTURE

The individual *Gábor* families are the building blocks of *Gábor* culture where the specific dialect which distinguishes them from other Romani-speaking groups is spoken. The families also establish kinship networks through marriages, which they arrange among themselves, and by the young who emerge from newly formed families. The marriage usually follows a certain pattern, known as patrilocality. Only the brides, who are usually married at a young age, are mobile and are equipped with a dowry before moving in with their in-laws. Over time, newly founded families move – except for the youngest son who inherits his father’s house if possible – into their own houses in the area. Sometimes the relocation of families creates new settlements and economies in other regions. This patrilocality practice means that the chances of a

family establishing themselves in a place depend mainly on the male offspring because their own offspring will in turn stay in the family. Thus, kinship networks of entire family clans have been established in different villages around Tîrgu Mureş. Large and wealthy families in particular often have distinguished men and women who will be honoured as *Baro* or *Phuro Rom* and *Bari* or *Phuri Romni* even after their death. These “great elders” are respected beyond their own extended family and are called in for jurisdiction in the *krisi romani* to settle severe, internal disputes within the group. They are also held in high esteem by the Hungarian and Romanian neighbours in the villages. In addition, these families often have one or more silver cups and jugs in their possession, which are generally called *taxtaj* and all have a specific name. These *taxtajs* were considered valuable heirlooms even during the time of the tent gypsies. Lucas J. Marienburg’s “Geography of the Grand Duchy of Transylva-

nia” of 1813 already claims that the “tent gypsy’s passion is one, and often several, silver cups.” (1987 [1813]: 107). Today’s *Gábor* determine the price for these *taxtajs* themselves. Their estimated value within the group can exceed its physical value by a multiple.

The influence of modernity has a striking effect on the settlement patterns of *Gábor* families. In earlier times, the *Gábor* settled in ethnically and geographically relatively closed housing developments in so-called “Zigani” at the edges of villages which are not exclusive to Transylvania. In recent decades, however, a growing influx of families from these areas at the edge of villages has moved to the villages’ main streets and to homes at the towns’ outskirts. It appears that the trail from the rural to the urban context is increasingly taken by many young *Gábor* families. Despite the inhabitation of some very stately homes, the *Gábor*’s flexible approach to the sedentary life and/or being mobile remains.



III. 7 A mourning *Gábor* family



Photo by Péter Berta (2001) III. 8 Adventist prayer house of the *Gábor*

Another important influence on the *Gábor* culture which in recent years has led to changing lifestyles concerns the missionary activity of neo-protestant churches. As a result of the successful proselytising by, for instance, the Pentecostal church, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and especially the Seventh-Day Adventists, many *Gábor* now visit church regularly, sometimes even several times a week. The transformation from rather passive church members to active believers led devout church-goers in the case of the *Gábor* living in Craciunesti, the village where most *Gábor* live and where most of them have already become Adventists, to a run separate, self-funded Adventist prayer house.

Significant conversion rates and a growing and ever more dominant role of these new religions occurred particularly after the political changes of 1989. Although neo-protestant missionary successes among Romani and gypsy groups is no exception in Romania, a specific adoption and influence of the Adventist worldview on *Gábor* culture cannot be denied. For example the influence on clothes where "white" is considered newly fashionable, the celebration of Holy Saturday combined with several hours of visiting the Adventist prayer houses or turning away from alcohol, pork, dance and magic make traditional cultural patterns appear in altered and partly brand-new clothes.

CONCLUSION

The *Gábor* have a historically grown relationship with other Romani and gypsy groups and the local majority population of their home of Transylvania. Their independent and mobile economy as well as the high flexibility and creativity in finding new niches in a changing surrounding society demonstrates that they flexibly adapt to the circumstances of their geographical and social environment until this day. Moreover, *Gábor* families organise themselves internally by large transregional kinship networks in which they maintain their traditions by adopting new influences and moulding them for themselves.

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